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As a way of preventing premature birth, a study released in 2008 recommends that women begin taking folic acid supplements to ensure the birth of healthy babies.

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"The Importance of Folic Acid in Pregnancy." Nancy Snyderman, correspondent. NBC Nightly News.
Transcript

The Importance of Folic Acid in Pregnancy

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:
We're back with some important health news tonight. It's about the vitamin supplement folic acid. A lot of people have heard it's very important for women thinking of having a child to get enough of it to prevent a potentiality serious birth defect, among other things. Now researchers have discovered another major reason why folic acid is vital. The story tonight from our chief medical editor Dr. Nancy Snyderman.

Dr. NANCY SNYDERMAN reporting:
Little Hannah was born just 72 hours ago at New York's Nyack Hospital.

Ms. JANA ROONEY (Hannah's Mother): She's downing it.

SNYDERMAN: She arrived two weeks later than expected but weighed in at a perfectly healthy seven pounds, 10 ounces.

Ms. ROONEY: The prenatal vitamins were very important to me. I made sure to get them right away, soon--like the second I found out I was pregnant.

SNYDERMAN: And she took one containing folic acid, a B vitamin long known to cut the risk for so-called neural tube birth defects like spina bifida. But a new study suggests that folic acid may do something even more remarkable.

Dr. ALAN FLEISCHMAN (March of Dimes Medical Director): For the first time in America, we have a very large study which shows that if women take folic acid supplementation for a year prior to pregnancy, they decrease their chance of having a premature baby by 70 percent.

SNYDERMAN: The study looked at more than 38,000 American women. Those who took the recommended 400 micrograms of folic acid daily for at least a year before conception were 50 to 70 percent less likely to give birth early, between 20 and 32 weeks, when the chances of being born healthy are decreased. A full-term pregnancy is one that lasts about 40 weeks.

Dr. WENDY WILCOX (Montefiore Medical Center): I think the most important thing is to make sure that even if you're not thinking about getting pregnant, that you take still folic acid supplementation,
because unplanned pregnancies do happen. They happen all the time.
SNYDERMAN: Doctors hope the findings of this study will give women even greater incentive to start folic acid supplementation earlier.
The March of Dimes says that every woman of childbearing age should be on a folic acid supplement, and that means, Brian, women as young as 18.